

Stockton Record

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**STOCKTON** - Recovery from addiction to drugs or alcohol doesn't come easy, Harold Butts said in a counseling session with a group of veterans in a once-empty apartment building.

It takes a lot of work, said Butts, 61, himself a recovered addict and Vietnam veteran. He's also the co-founder of Dignity's Alcove, which has moved into the Yale Apartments building and has just cleared the final hurdle to open as a federally funded program for transitional housing for homeless veterans.

It has been four years since the fledgling nonprofit group learned it was eligible for an expansion grant from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

That's how long it has taken to get approval.

Butts used the organization's own history to try to inspire the counseling group. "The sky's the limit for us," he said. "The sky's the limit for you."

Dignity's Alcove also provides money-management assistance, drug-and-alcohol counseling and educational classes. It has done so since it opened in 2007. This month, it added a veterans drop-in center and became an official part of the VA's regional push to end vet homelessness.

"I'm just happy, jumping up for joy that this is happening," said co-founder Mary Butts, 58. She's Harold's wife and also a veteran and recovered addict. "Now the work really begins."

There is in-house counseling and access to other services that help veterans stay clean from addictions. But it's not just substance-abuse treatment, Sometimes homelessness itself can be a kind of addiction, she said.

Dignity's Alcove models itself after an existing VA program, said Stacy Studebaker, head of the outpatient homeless program for the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, a region that includes San Joaquin County.

"It's a model that gets people back to work," she said. Dignity's Alcove offers transitional housing of up to two years, bridging the gap between 90-day emergency beds and permanent housing vouchers for veterans. "It's the right length of time for people to have a place to call home."

And it's enough time to secure benefits, receive training or go to school and find a job. From there, they can move on to permanent housing. "And they're supported every step of the way," Studebaker said.

It's been a rocky ride since 2008, when Dignity's Alcove was awarded a \$400,000 grant to expand and to get continued funding to house up to 20 veterans.

The organization found a landlord willing to comply with strict VA requirements, but that deal crashed when the property owner went into foreclosure. Things got back on track with a new landlord and a new building. Veterans began moving in last year but had to leave because the building wasn't up to city code. A new fire-sprinkler system had to be installed.

There were other ups and downs along the way. On the upside, the VA pledged to support twice the number of beds at the facility. On the downside, thieves swept through the vacant facility and made off with about 20 mini refrigerators for the individual rooms.

Butts said Dignity's Alcove has had a lot of help along the way - from the new landlord, St. Mary's Interfaith, and from veterans organizations such as the Disabled American Veterans Charities. On the red-tape front, the nonprofit group gives credit to Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Pleasanton, for helping navigate unfamiliar bureaucratic territory.

The organization got the nod from the city to move in at the end of February. The VA signed off on it, and on Tuesday, a team of social workers came in to interview the first 17 residents. There's room for 23 more.

Some things remain undone - from adding an elevator for disabled veterans to installing equipment to operate as a commercial kitchen.

And the Internal Revenue Service recently revoked the nonprofit's tax-exempt status for failing to file returns for three years. Mary Butts' diagnosis of cancer and a fire that destroyed financial records created hardships, but the nonprofit delivered returns for 2008 and 2009 in February, according to a letter sent to the federal agency by the nonprofit's accountant. Dignity's Alcove officials said they expect their tax-exempt status will be reinstated. An IRS spokesman said he could not disclose the status.

The new location at the corner of Washington and California streets is now a drop-in center for any veteran looking for assistance. Volunteers are on hand with advice on a number of issues.

"These are people who got lost; now they're on line," said 63-year-old Ron Gallardo, who helped people find work before retiring from the county and volunteering at the drop-in center. Those gaps shouldn't be barriers, he said. "Medically. Physically. Everybody gets lost every once in a while."

Bill Wade, 51, is a U.S. Army veteran. He was stationed in both Korea and Germany during his service from 1978 through 1984.

Before coming to Dignity's Alcove last year, he'd been through programs for both substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"You see things and you do things and they're hard to deal with sometimes," he said.

He'd used drugs and alcohol his whole life before addiction eventually cost him his home.

Besides a place to stay, the help Wade has found at Dignity's Alcove has helped him deal with the reasons why he turned to drugs and alcohol in the first place.

"It's opened up a whole new phase in my recovery," he said. "This place is a godsend for me."